

The Assassin's Smile: Facial Expression as Political Expression

by Daphne Rozenblatt

How does history explain a smile?

If he were winged by two men in similar clothing, two women, or two children, his smile, laughter, and cheery disposition might mean something else. But flanked by two officers, Luigi Lucheni's smile was the sign of disease and depravity. While the smile might be a basic - and some might say universal - human expression,[1] the meaning of this smile was shaped by political, legal, scientific, and popular discourses at the turn of the twentieth century.

This photograph was taken of Luigi Lucheni (1873-1910) after he had been arrested for the murder of Empress Elisabeth of Austria, still popularly known as Sisi (1854-1898). On September 10, 1898 in Geneva, Lucheni stabbed her through the chest with a thin blade that penetrated her heart. Born in Paris, Lucheni was an Italian who had served in the army before emigrating to Switzerland. Like many other Italian anarchists of the time, Lucheni had gone abroad to seek a better life but found himself in dire conditions. Embracing Kropotkin's notion of "propaganda by deed" - the committing of a political act that would be exemplary to others - Lucheni had plotted to kill Prince Philippe, Duke of Orléans (1869-1926). When the Duke changed his travel plans, Lucheni settled on a member of the aristocracy. Because the empress was traveling incognito, Lucheni didn't know exactly who he had killed until after his arrest. Lucheni's smile, therefore, took on political significance: Lucheni smiled in the aftermath of his surprising and successful attack against a literal and figurative head of state.



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The famous photo of Lucheni's seemingly confident stride and easy grin raises three issues central to the history of emotions:

- *How do we interpret emotions in historical evidence?*
- *What is the relationship between emotions and their physiological expression?*
- *How does historicizing emotions contribute to our broader understanding of history?*

How do we interpret emotions in historical evidence?

The meaning of an emotion and how it may be studied is currently the subject of heated debate for scholars across the disciplines, and historians face the additional challenge of interpreting emotions through documents. In the nineteenth century, the advent of modern photography that could capture a fleeting smile, and the modern sciences such as anthropology, psychiatry, and physiology, produced visual and textual sources about human emotions. Enabled by mass media, certain images like Lucheni's smile circulated widely and sparked public, scientific, and legal discussions about the killer's emotions. Through such debates, historians can glean more than the "facts" about what Lucheni felt (did Lucheni smile because he felt pleasure?). They can also interpret prevailing emotional norms, accepted expressions, and how emotions were practiced, unconsciously and consciously, strategically and tactically.

As an artifact, the photograph may appear to objectively capture a person's emotional expression. However, it does not capture whether an expression is an enduring or fleeting state, or whether it is a reaction to another person, situation, object, or the camera itself. Modern photography captures the paradoxes of the smile:

Benevolence, satisfaction, joy, malice, as well as impertinence, irony, contempt, cruelty...No human expression displays such an extensive range of sentiments as the smile. Innate, this non-verbal means of communication grows richer as we age. Universal, its meaning varies depending on the culture and the context in which it is given and received.[2]

Ingmar Bergman's *The Passion of Anna* describes these ambiguities after the character Elis Vergerus takes a portrait photo of another character, Andreas Winkleman. Elis then shows Andreas a photograph he took of his smiling wife who suffered from a terrible migraine at the time. Elis says: "I don't imagine I reach into the soul with this photography. I can only register an interplay of forces, large and small. You look at this picture and imagine things. All is nonsense. All play, all poetry. You can't read another person with any claim to certainty. Not even pain always gives a reaction." [3]

In the case of Luigi Lucheni's smile, photographic evidence can be matched with published documents. [4] Popular, legal, and scientific publications all commented on Lucheni's smile. One news source described how Lucheni, between the two police officers, was "smiley, with the wholly naïve and distant smile of his

eyes half-closed and his thin lips shaded by a small red moustache. Luccheni, always laughing, took off his cap."[5] One criminal anthropological study described Lucheni as "short, stocky, shaved, bony, prognathic, a smile on his lips," and his attitude in court as "affected by a snicker." [6] People noticed Lucheni's smile both after his arrest and during his trial, and they described this smile as a characteristic of the anarchist murderer or as a symptom of his mental state.

What is the relationship between emotions and their physiological expression?

Does an outward expression reliably indicate an internal state? Are emotions internal experiences that find outward expression, or are emotions located between, beyond, or outside of the mind-body dichotomy?[7] Potentially indicating a general mood or disposition, a reaction to circumstance, or a conscious act, the smile reflects the complexity of such a question, which involves debates about the place of emotions between body and mind and whether emotions are a product of nature or nurture. While such a question may today seem more suited to psychological rather than historical research, the history of emotions can examine the social and cultural shaping of the smile to challenge or confirm universalist interpretations of human behavior. Colin Jones, for example, has argued that the toothy smile became acceptable in Early Modern Paris as a result of politics, culture, and modern dentistry.[8] Historians also historicize the scientific and academic debates that have shaped questions of nature or nurture. Nevertheless, even "universalists" such as Paul Ekman - the psychologist and proponent of mapping emotions through facial expressions - has underscored the social and cultural complexity of a smile: "Yet the smile can be enigmatic; although it is the expression for the positive emotions, it also can be used to express politeness and uncertainty, as well as to mask negative emotions." [9]

What did Lucheni's smile express about his character and emotions? Was the smile a purely physiological reaction, or was the smile an intentional act meant to deceive or manipulate others? In and of itself, this photograph cannot offer any convincing evidence for any response to these questions. However, contemporary scientists grappled with these same questions; and in both their scientific and popular publications, Lucheni's smile played a conspicuous role in judging his character and culpability. During the nineteenth century, emotions increasingly became the subject of scientific investigation. The modern medical and biological sciences adopted philosophical questions about human nature and mind to the experimental method, and together with evolutionary theory and positivism, they gave birth to new scientific disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychiatry, physiology, and criminology. In this atmosphere, physical investigations into human character led researchers to medicalize and pathologize emotions.[10]

But what was a smile? French physiologist Duchenne de Boulogne (1806-1875) used bioelectric experimentation to define the smile mechanistically. The genuine - or Duchenne smile - was defined by the spontaneous contraction of specific muscle groups. Differentiated from other smiles, it could be contemptuous, theatrical, or made in an effort to be polite. Charles Darwin (1809-1882) described the smile as a facial expression that had evolved along with the human species, but he also commented on the difference between the joyous smile and what he called the "derisive" smile. He wrote

Scorn and disdain, as well as sneering and defiance, may be displayed by a slight uncovering of the canine tooth on one side of the face; and this movement appears to graduate into one closely like a smile. Or the smile or laugh may be real, although one of derision; and this implies that the offender is so insignificant that he excites only amusement; but the amusement is generally a pretense.[11]

Italian physiologist Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910) also discussed the emotional plasticity and contradictions of the smile in not only his *Physiology of Pleasure* but also his *Physiology of Pain*; in other words, the smile could as easily relate to negative emotions or displeasure as to positive emotions like joy.[12] Whether defined through physiological reaction, understood in terms of evolution, or used to explore emotion, the smile that expressed feelings and intentions other than happiness interested nineteenth century scientists.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the criminal sciences began to include the smile in their descriptions of criminals, but here the smile was either a symptom of insanity or malice. Criminologists from across Europe - Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, Havelock Ellis, and Alexandre Lasseigne - described such smiles as devious, deceptive, malicious, or cynical. While such a variety of smiles was also described in literature (one might recall Shakespeare's description of Claudius in *Hamlet* as a "villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!"[13]), in the hands of medical scientists, these smiles became signs to be interpreted and which could help ascertain legal culpability. As one physician described it, the "sinister smile" offered a "glimpse of the lack of correlation between their true state of conscience and the mimicked movements of their expression." [14] This unconscionable criminal smile became tied to the willful - although still possible insane - criminal intent of the nineteenth-century anarchist terrorist, whose "satanic (or idiotic) smile" became one of the key characteristics of his image.[15] The many references to Lucheni's smile were not only descriptive of his facial expressions. By emphasizing the smile, scientific and popular commentators drew upon contemporary discourses which defined political crime and malice through the smile.

How does historicizing emotions contribute to our broader understanding of history?

Does it matter that Lucheni smiled after murdering Empress Elisabeth, how does his smile enhance our understanding of nineteenth-century political murder or the history of criminal emotions more generally? Smiling can also be a social and emotional practice that constitutes political strategy. In the case of nineteenth-century anarchist assassination, smiling and laughing were bodily expressions that defied popular reactions of shock, horror, and sadness and furthermore, the legal system that sought remorse and contrition. Smiles and laughter were one way to reject political order by resisting the moral feelings prescribed by the state.

Luigi Lucheni's generally good spirits throughout his trial and the smiling recorded both inside and outside the courtroom may be interpreted as such a political and emotional strategy, an affront to the standing "facial regime". Lucheni claimed that he was happy (*contento*) at the death of the empress. After all, he reminded his interviewers after arrest, he was an anarchist. But Lucheni also consciously sought publicity for his act, aligning with his political commitment to propaganda by deed: prior to the murder, Lucheni claimed he wanted to kill someone in order to be in the papers. Indeed, this photograph appears to show Lucheni smiling at the camera. Likewise, the scientific interpretation of Lucheni's emotions also had political valences. By describing his smile as a symptom of his psychology divorced from his politics, such apolitical scientific perspectives delegitimized Lucheni's political positions by reducing his smile to an emotional and possibly insane expression.

Photographs have the power to both capture and convey emotional expressions. However, human hands produce a photograph on both sides of the snap of a camera. Seemingly objective documentary photos might be selected by several takes of the same subject (a good example here would be Dorothea Lange's famous 1936 photo *Migrant Mother*).^[16] At the same time, the interpretation of an image may become a matter of severe scrutiny and ongoing debate (such as Duchenne de Boulogne's photographs of electronically-stimulated facial expressions).

In this photograph, Luigi Lucheni appears to have consciously smiled in front of the camera and his continual smiling throughout his arrest and trial was seen as conspicuous and disturbing to those who saw it. The visual and textual documents of Lucheni's smile contribute to a history of the deviant smile that became increasingly prominent during the nineteenth- and widely dispersed during the twentieth- century. The smile that contradicted accepted social mores became evidence of criminal character and increasingly, the relationship between insanity and deviance. It was but one of the physical symptoms that physicians and social scientists used as evidence of criminal character in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Images also have the power to galvanize emotions or shape emotional interpretations, and this photograph contributes to a history of the smiling killer as a cultural trope. While the twentieth century goes beyond the scope of this article, we might ask how images of a smiling killer are used to signify deviance, sickness, and notoriety: Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, James Holmes, and Anders Behring Breivik, have all been captured with a smile. The image of the smiling killer is also found in the arts, literature, and cinema. The Guy Fawkes mask, *Batman's* Joker, Hannibal Lecter from *Silence of the Lambs*, or Pennywise in Stephen King's *It* are just a few of the fictional characters from mainstream Anglo-American culture that feature characters that walk the line between evil and insanity and have been popularized around the world.

In the nineteenth century, processes of national unification and increasingly democratic political representation were accompanied by political movements that rejected the legitimacy of European political establishments. Some of the proponents of anarchism who used violence as a form of political expression became increasingly feared, and deeply sensationalized in the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the growth of popular media and the development of photography in both artistic and scientific contexts allowed images such as that of Lucheni to be viewed and dispersed in a new way. The way we view contemporary photographs of smiling killers today may be traced back to the scientific discourses surrounding the image of Luigi Lucheni, which emphasized the relationship between deviance, insanity, and an eerie smile.

Further Reading

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[1] Paul Ekman is the most recent proponent of universal emotions. See Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Understanding Faces and Feelings* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012). For other perspectives on this debate, see Robert C. Solomon, ed, *What is an Emotion? Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2] "The smile (1)" *Sourire*, curated by Thomas Galifot, (2016). Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

[3] Ingmar Bergman, *The Passion of Anna* (United Artists, 1969). The whole scene begins at 51:20 and the moment referred to here begins at 53:45.

[4] Historians have developed several ways of using visual culture as historical evidence rather than illustration. Two classic discussions that have influenced historians include: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1973) and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978). Both texts are available online.

[5] Henri de Weindel, *Francis Joseph. Francois-Joseph Intime* (Paris: Librairie Félix Juven, 1905).

[6] Paul-Louis Ladame, Emmanuel Régis, *Le Régicide Lucheni: Étude d'Anthropologie Criminelle* (Paris: A. Maloine, 1907), 21, 6.

[7] For a recent overview of these debates, see Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[8] See Colin Jones, "Introduction," *The Smile Revolution in Eighteenth Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-15.

[9] Mark G. Frank and Paul Ekman, "Physiological Effects of the Smile," *Directions in Psychiatry* 16, no. 25 (December 1996), 2.

[10] See, for example: David G. Horn, *The Criminal Body: Lombroso and the Anatomy of Deviance* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Otniel E. Dror, Bettina Hitzer, Anja Laukötter, and Pilar León-Sanz, eds, "History of Science and the Emotions," Special Issue, *Osiris*, 31 (2016).

[11] Charles Darwin, *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: John Murray, 1872), 255.

[12] Paolo Mantegazza, *Fisiologia del Piacere* (Milan: Bernardoni, 1867); Paolo Mantegazza, *Fisiologia del Dolore* (Florence: Felice Paggi, 1880).

[13] Act 1, Scene 5, 107-110.

[14] José Ingenieros, *La Simulazione della Pazzia in Rapporto alla Criminologia: la Medicina, ecc., ecc.*, 157.

[15] Walter Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism* (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 3.

[16] Dorothea Lange, "Migrant Mother," Library of Congress, February 1936. LC-USF34-9058C.

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